DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 141 RC 022 271

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TITLE What Is an Experiential Learner?
PUB DATE 1999-10-00
NOTE 12p.; In: Selected Monographs from the Association for Experiential Education International Conference (27th, Rochester, NY, October 1999); see RC 022 262.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Active Learning; Art Education; *Cognitive Style; *College Students; *Experiential Learning; Higher Education; Inquiry; *Learning Experience; Learning Theories; Relevance (Education); Student Attitudes; *Student Reaction
IDENTIFIERS Dewey (John); Reflective Thinking

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the learning experiences of two college students enrolled in an experientially based art education course. The students, "Beth" and "Alissa," were interviewed regarding their responses to viewing an art exhibit. The students also completed a writing assignment incorporating personal contemplations about how they processed their learning experiences. Beth was more contemplative in her learning style and described herself as an "active listener," while Alissa learned in a more engaged and reflective way. Beth and Alissa were also asked how their learning experiences could be applied to the four principles of experiential learning: engagement, reflective, responsible, and relevant. According to learning theorists, experiential learning occurs when students are engaged intellectually and involved in an active way as evidenced by taking responsibility, ownership, and control over their learning; reflecting on the process and product of their learning; and connecting their learning with what is relevant to themselves and the world around them. The stories of Alissa and Beth illustrate how both students learned in experiential ways, yet differed in the manner in which they expressed their learning. However, Alissa and Beth did not demonstrate all four principles of experiential learning within the scenarios described, and they indicated a lack of experiential learning in other situations. Variables of student and instructor characteristics, as well as the issue of learning how to learn in experiential ways, need to be addressed in future research. (Contains 21 references.) (LP)

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ED 438 141

Ref# C200988

October 1999

What is an Experiential Learner?

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Introduction

The instructor told us to take a place on the benches and use the circular pillows to help sit in a way that comfortably aligns the body. Next she demonstrated the basic meditation position, in which one [sic] sits cross legged and cups their [sic] hands with thumbs touching each other at belly level. This body position helps [one to find center].

Upon entering the studio, I saw ballet bars connected to the walls to aid the dancers [sic] in warming up. Warm-up helps the dancer find his or her [sic] center. [The instructor] also showed us that in the proper first position [the arms] are curved round like a bowl and the hands rest gently in front of the belly.

In all meditative practices, whether [they take place] in a Zen Center or a dance studio, the removal of distractions, the placement of purposeful objects, and the implementation of commitment nurtures growth in body and mind.

—Journal entry by student of Art and Contemplative Practice: Through the Lens of Gender and Culture

Most of the class agreed that the experience with meditation at the Rochester Zen Center was an important part of their semester-long, "contemplative" journey, exploring the way artists have looked at spiritual practices. During an interview with *Annie author of the above journal entry, she shared her wonderment in discovering the similarities of the hand positions between Zen meditative practices, the art of ballet and Christian prayer. In class the next day, the group briefly explored the similarities between such disparate cultures. Further reflection on the role of dance as a contemplative practice, and on a dance number she had choreographed, became the focus of this students final research project.

This monograph will serve as a contemplative journey as well - an exploration of a question for experiential educators who teach at the college level. That is, in courses that

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are defined as experiential, how are students learning and are they learning in ways that could be defined as experiential? The purpose of this monograph, then, is to challenge readers to explore this question. To accomplish this purpose, two rationales will be given as to why this question is important, two students stories will be presented and analyzed, experiential learning will be defined and suggestions for next steps will be presented.

The course referenced above, Art and Contemplative Practice: Through the Lens of Gender and Culture, served as one of two sites at which to conduct dissertation research. It connected real life experience with the theoretical and conceptual foundations of that experience, a central component of experiential learning. Through forty-two hours of course observation, twenty-eight one-on-one interviews, a focus group and analysis of journal and other written assignments, each of the students unique personalities, experiences and perceptions emerged. As with Annie, each student had a story to tell of how they learned and what they experienced. From each of these stories, then, it will be possible to determine the subjective realities of the students pertaining to how they learn and if they learn in ways that can be described as experiential.

Shifting From Instruction to Teaching

The question of how students are learning in experiential courses is important because of a relatively recent change in focus from teaching to learning within the college classroom. Congruent with this shift in thinking about teaching and learning at the college level, there needs to be more of a balanced discourse that emphasizes the subtle nuances and complexities of learning within any discussion of teaching (Barr and Tagg 1995; Love and Love 1995; Travis 1995 as stated in Stage, Muller, Kinzie and Simmons, 1998). University of Rochester's "Quest" courses, of which Art and Contemplative Practice: Through the Lens of Gender and Culture is one, are good examples of learning-centered courses because of their focus on the student as researcher and explorer. Therefore, this course will enable me to answer a timely question that focuses not just on teaching within an experiential course, but on the learning that evolves from it.

Students' Perceptions of Active Learning

There is a second reason why it is important to know how students are learning. Within any experiential situation, the incorporation of experiential learning strategies does not guarantee that experiential learning will occur. Experiential learning is more than "active", physical involvement (Anthony, 1996). What goes on in a student's mind points to the experiential nature of a learning situation as much as, or more than, that which can be observed. Therefore, it is vital that we assess how students are learning. For example, during an interview, Alissa's perceptions of the way she viewed herself as learning was clarified.

> [T]here has been a shift in the way that I learn, or the way that I look at things now just because I feel a lot more open minded about things and a lot more apt to search for connections between things that are not just from my point of view. . . . I tend to look at things from a more universal standpoint . . . It's like a new way of thinking about something, which I think is different than most classes.

By stating that she is more "apt to search for connections between things that are not just from [her] point of view", Alissa described a change in her learning towards a more active mode. This change may have been observed in class through her increased dialogue on multiple perspectives of an issue. But it is only by asking the student herself that we will we get a complete picture of her perspective.

In summary, while an experiential classroom must incorporate appropriate teaching methodologies and curricular components, students need to ultimately see themselves in the role of active learner and inquirer, or they may remain in the passive role, unable to be true inquirers.

Two Student's Stories.

At the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery, students were greeted by the curator of a traveling exhibit called "Faith and Practice: Religious Objects from Diverse Traditions." The focus of the exhibit was to "reverence the reverence of others"; to study works of art from five of the world's religious traditions. On the left wall of the room hung the Genzu Mandala: Mandala of the Womb World. Although difficult to describe, this painting consisted of a ring of circles, one inside another, filled with hundreds of Buddha figures in a variety of postures, drawn in exquisite detail. We were informed that those practicing the teachings of Japanese Buddhism would begin their meditations by working from the center outward, progressively absorbing an understanding of the sect through an examination of each level. In her journal, Alissa wrote what viewing this Mandala meant to her.

> The intricacy of the formal elements and the inherent order within the seemingly disorganized clutter of shapes were unlike anything I have seen. The longer I spent looking at the shapes and images, first as individuals and then as a part of the whole, the more details became clear to me. I began to see how effective this piece would be as a focusing aid for meditation. [I was amazed] at the concentration it must have taken to to memorize all the different symbolic body and hand positions. Seeing this beautiful and mysterious drawing mounted on an austere, white museum wall made me crave the

> opportunity to see it in its intended setting. I envisioned it hanging on the stone wall of a candle light Buddhist monastery, high in the mountains, somewhere in the East. That brief vision encapsulates my fascination with art, especially the art of other times or other countries.

This student's story addressed how this student learned as a result of her experience with the Mandala. It also encapsulated well the many levels of experiential learning that took place for her. The ability to view this Mandala a few inches from where it was displayed resulted in a more powerful experience than either a textbook or a verbal description could have done. Alissa demonstrated a high level of *engagement* as evidenced by her "fascination" with the object and her intellectual musings on the religious purpose of this object. She *reflected* on the meaning this Mandala held for the Buddhist monks, both in her journal and later during class. Lastly, this student *related* the viewing of this Mandala both to how it is practiced as well as to her own fascination with art and cultures of a different time and place. This journal entry, although only a snippet of one students experience, presents a point of view that begins to answer the question of how students learned in this course and if they learned in ways that could be defined as experiential. Beth's experience in the class was quite different from either Annie's or Alissa's. While Beth's presence in the course was quiet, unassuming, and at times very "unexperiential", it wasn't until the interview that it became apparent how she learned and whether she learned in experiential ways. Although Beth indicated her receptivity to learning in more traditional modes based on past experiences, she also talked about a way of learning experientially that seemed positive for her.

> Probably I guess the process [for me] is just reading the material and thinking about it. I tend not to talk that much in class, but it's not always the case that I am in outer space or anything. I tend to work through problems more through listening to other people's comments and other people's point of views and thinking about them that way rather than always throwing mine out there. I tend to be a pretty active listener, if that makes any sense.

The important part of this paragraph is her self-definition as an "active listener". Although Beth's mode of experiential learning is more unassuming than others, perhaps it should not be discounted as a valid way of learning experientially. It may be apparent from their enthusiastic participation in class that Alissa and Annie learn in a fully engaged and reflective way. Yet, Beth's more silent intellectual musings during class discussions may demonstrate engaged or reflective learning at a similar level.

> An astrologer once told me that my past was a bag full of groceries that had ripped and spilled all over the planet. It was my task in this life to pick up the

> groceries. If I felt drawn to a place, if the longing persisted for more than a day, I should go there.
>
> — Alison Hawthorne-Deming, Temporary Homelands: Essays on Nature, Spirit and Place.

One of the required writing assignments was to write a "book report" incorporating personal contemplations. While describing the relationship between the author's poetic commentary stated above and her own life experiences, Beth again demonstrated a level of engagement and reflection not evident in the classroom nor during the interview. As Beth wrote about her personal connection with gardening, she explored some compelling issues in a highly descriptive way.

> I am not sure what made gardening so pleasurable for me that summer. Was it my body's need to soak up an excess of heat and sunlight after a seemingly never-ending winter? Or was it just the smile my boyfriend beamed at me as he noticed the dirty fingernails and freckled face of his outdoorsy companion? Was my desire to grow things a sign of my mental and physical rebirth after several years of perpetual exhaustion and emotional indifference, or simply the discovery of a love for all things green?

Perhaps most meaningful about the whole project was my subtle realization that I felt comfortable kneeling in the dirt and picking through the intricate web of fuzzy vines in a search for perfectly ripened, mild tasting cukes. At a time in my life when so many questions loomed in my mind - Where will I finish college? What kind of job will I find? Will I ever feel content? I understood that preparing soil, planting seeds, watering plants, and harvesting homegrown vegetables made me feel alive, active and productive. Perhaps any place where I could find a small piece of earth to plant flowers or veggies could feel like home. While it took me some time to recognize that I felt at ease with my hands immersed in warm, summer soil, the realization that my conception of one's own place in the world was far from universal came as a rather unexpected shock.

Reading this essay was like opening a window to a world not perceived before. The voice that Beth lacked in the classroom seemed to emerge through her reflective writings. Perhaps Beth's perspective is even more valuable than that obtained from the other students because of her unassuming nature and relatively non-experiential stance in the classroom.

Beth's perspective demonstrated here is also significant, as she admitted to having few experiences writing in such a personal manner and found the exercise awkward. Yet, her story of personal awakening seemed highly engaging for her and she admitted to being inspired by the book. Perhaps Beth's experiences in this course can help to answer

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a question that developed during this research. Can students who are somewhat resistive to experiential learning still learn in experiential ways given the opportunity to do so? Perhaps experiential learning can also occur through silent "active listening" or through opportunities to write critically and reflectively for those who are hesitant to learn in experiential ways.

Defining Experiential Learning

Each story described above was analyzed in light of what it means to learn in an experiential manner. The initial definition used for this research emerged from a review of the diverse literature and an analysis of the primary theorists. It was then categorized into four principles: engagement, reflection, responsibility and relevance. While other principles of experiential learning were noted in the literature, these four principles most closely aligned with the theories of John Dewey. His theories formed the theoretical foundation of this research and will be used to analyze what it means to learn experientially.

This definition was used during each interview as students were, first, given a brief definition of experiential learning; second, requested to clarify the term in their own words, to ensure understanding of the principle and obtain their perspectives; and third, asked if experiential learning occurred for them in the course. In addition to the following definition, analysis of students' insights on experiential learning will become central to this research process. The act of verbalizing each principle, though, revealed the potential complexity and lack of clarity inherent in each. As the definition was applied and discussed, the borders used to delineate each principle became less and less clear cut. The complexity of the definition may become a weakness within the research. For the purpose of this monograph, however, the following is a brief discussion of how experiential learning was defined and applied according to its four principles: engagement, reflection, responsibility and relevance.

Engagement as active learning and inquiry-based learning

Engagement, the first principle of experiential learning, is described within the literature in two ways. First, engagement is present within experiential learning when students are learning material in an active, rather than a passive, way. Second, the process of learning through inquiry, or a teaching/learning methodology called inquiry-based learning, can be described as engaged learning. Although active learning can be described physically as learning through hands-on tasks, central to this aspect is the quality of students' mental experiences. There must be "active intellectual involvement in the learning experience [that is] characterized by increased insight" (Kyriacou and Marshall,

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1989, p. 2 as stated in Anthony, 1996). Engagement is described more specifically by others as the process of analyzing and evaluating information in an intellectual way, rather than just passively receiving it and memorizing it (King, 1993; Dewey, 1916).

The second level of engagement, inquiry-based learning, is described in the literature as participating in a task where answers to questions are not provided. It becomes a challenge for each student to grapple, struggle and ultimately discover answers, given the information at hand. This inductive approach to learning moves from the gathering of specific information to the formation of general concepts. Bateman (1990), described this process well when he stated, "give the students a set of facts and slip the leash. They speculate, they create new concepts, they apply old concepts, they test, they reject, they ask for more evidence" (p. 18). This inquiry-based approach is considered intellectually engaging and stimulating for the students involved.

Reflective learning

The second principle of experiential learning is the principle of reflection. According to Dewey, reflection is "the discernment of the relation between what we try to do and what happens in consequence" (Dewey, 1916, p. 144). Reflection is what enables the learner to learn from the experience. By reflecting on the experience, its quality increases and our ability to act with an "end in view" becomes possible. Reflection also occurs during an analysis of the process of learning. The focus then becomes the insights and dialogues that can occur through reflecting on this process. (Joplin, 1981; Perry, 1995). Reflecting on the end result as well as on the process of learning is a very necessary step for experiential learners.

Responsible learning

Dewey also wrote about students as responsible and self-reliant learners. He rejected traditional education's tendency to put students in a passive role in the classroom. Instead, he promoted the development of a learning community, where "all individuals have the opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility" (Dewey, 1938, p. 56). The instructors serve to guide students in deriving meaning from the learning experiences. According to Horwood & Herbert (1995), "active" does not translate into "experiential". The main distinction is the "responsibility assigned to the students to derive meaning from what they have done" (p. 21). Concepts such as self-reliant learning, taking ownership, and learning independently are seen as similar concepts to taking responsibility for one's learning, yet different in many respects. For example, self-reliant learners have trust in, or are dependent upon, themselves. All concepts pertain to the student an active rather than passive learner.

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Relevant learning

The fourth characteristic, relevancy, refers to both experiences that connect (and are relevant) to the learner's past experiences, present interests or future goals, and experiences that connect with societal and "real world" uses or concerns. Relevancy is an integral component of Dewey's theory of experience because he sought to connect learning with what students already know— their "internal conditions"— (i.e. interests and motivations), as "the starting point for all learning" (Dewey, 1938, p. 74). Personal relevance is also central to Joplin's (1981) definition of experiential learning. She believes that experiential learning is based on the assumption that learning starts with the students' relationship with the topic (Joplin, 1981).

Summary

Creating a definition of experiential learning is challenging and complex. A review of the literature reveals the vast number of situations that can be described as experiential and the large number of descriptors associated with the term. According to this literature, and the theories of John Dewey, experiential learning occurs when students are engaged intellectually and involved in an active way, take responsibility, ownership and control over their learning, reflect on the process and the product of their learning, and connect their learning with what is relevant — to themselves and to the world around them.

Going back to the students' stories, the reader can see how both Alissa and Beth learned in experiential ways. Yet, the manner by which they demonstrated their learning differed. In addition, both students did not demonstrate all four principles of experiential learning within the scenarios described and they indicated a lack of experiential learning in other situations. Overall, however, each story demonstrated individual student perspectives that defined and shaped how they learned and whether they learned in experiential ways.

Next Steps

While many of the students in this course learned in ways that can be described as highly experiential, beginning analysis of the data reveal multiple levels of meaning that exist for each student and within the course as a whole. Research results can not be examined without including its many variables, such as students' characteristics and the instructor's teaching style. The course is composed of students who differ by personalities, goals and prior experiences. For example, Alissa stated an interest in art as a potential career and demonstrated a receptivity to more active approaches to learning (as indicated in an educational autobiography completed as part of this research). On the other

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hand, Beth's four year college experience failed to expose her to much more than the traditional lecture approach. Additionally, as a second semester Senior, thoughts on upcoming graduation were pervasive (also indicated on her educational autobiography). What is the relationship between these students' prior experiences and goals and how they learned in this course? Further analysis of the data will reveal this relationship between student characteristics and how they learn in experiential ways.

Also central to this research are the variables of instructor characteristics and teaching styles. The instructor, and the one who developed this course, challenged herself to integrate an interest in experiential learning and knowledge of art and contemplative practice into a fairly unique course. Students indicated, during the interviews, that teaching style and course structure influenced their perceptions in multiple ways. Further analysis of the data will incorporate the variables of instructor characteristics.

An additional issue for further consideration revolves around whether students need to learn how to learn in experiential ways. My data suggests, at a preliminary level, that as they develop as scholars, students need to learn how to challenge issues, reflect intellectually or compare issues raised in class with relevant experiences. Should experiential courses play a role in teaching students how to learn experientially, or should we expect students to respond appropriately if given the right combination of experiential opportunities? These complex questions address the intricacies of how students learn.

Overall, and in accordance with a learning-centered approach to teaching and learning, this course became "a dynamic setting where pedagogical practices and learners' characteristics [met] and where the quality of this interaction influence[d] the outcomes" (Barr and Tagg 1995; Menges and Svinicki 1991; Millar 1996; Palmer 1993, 1997, as stated in Stage, Muller, Kinzie and Simmons, 1998). Like the Genzu Mandala, as data analysis progressed from one step to the next, complexities not realized through superficial examination were revealed. Further analysis of the data will be accomplished through strategies such as creating matrixes, focusing on time, role and context, and triangulating the data (Miles, M.B. & Huberman, A.M, 1994). The variables of student and instructor characteristics, as well as the issue of learning how to learn in experiential ways, will all need to be included in data analysis in order to create a more complete picture of how students learned.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the question of how students are learning in experiential courses is not an easy one to answer. Analysis of interview transcripts, reflective writings and course observation notes will reveal student perspectives within each of their stories. Defining

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what experiential learning really means is an important step. Being open to what else may be found is an important piece of the qualitative process and necessary to ascertain if students are learning in ways not considered before. A learning-centered approach will focus not solely on "did experiential learning happen?", but on the more complex issue of "were the students ultimately experiential learners?" Questions and investigations such as this one will contribute to the growing research within the field and are needed for the field to continue to contribute to student learning.

* *In this paper, all names are alias.*

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